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**Opening address by the
President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union**

Mr. Duarte Pacheco

Excellencies, Speakers of parliament,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the beautiful and historic city of Vienna and to officially open the in-person segment of the Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament. I would like to thank our hosts, the Austrian Parliament, for the energy and passion they have invested in the organization of this unique Conference.

This is the first time we have met in person as a global parliamentary community in nearly two years. Despite huge scientific advances in the development of treatments and vaccines, the pandemic is not yet over, with over 4 million confirmed deaths having resulted from COVID-19. Aside from the economic losses, our hard-won progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals has been undermined and many governments have used the pandemic as a pretext to roll back human rights and weaken democracy.

In some regions, the unresolved challenges of the past have continued to fester or have even erupted with a vengeance, in the form of attacks on democratically elected parliaments in several countries.

Earlier this year, a military coup in Myanmar wiped out years of hard work in establishing effective and representative institutions in the country. We have expressed our solidarity with the parliament and people of Myanmar and stand ready to support the return to constitutional order in the country. During the Conference, we will be hearing from the President of the Committee to Represent the Union Assembly of Myanmar. I ask you to continue to support him and his colleagues in their efforts to represent the interests of the people of Myanmar.

In Venezuela, the political crisis has reached new heights. Just over a week ago, the IPU undertook a long overdue mission to Venezuela. We held frank discussions with the representatives of the various political factions in the country, in an effort to get a better understanding of the situation on the ground and to mobilize action by all concerned to overcome the crisis. We hope that the outcome of the Mexico Talks will be reflected in a sound framework for dialogue, which can lead to progress in meeting the real needs of the Venezuelan people.

Over the past few weeks, we have witnessed the tragic events unfolding in Afghanistan, a country where for over twenty years the IPU has tried to assist a fledgling parliament in its efforts to build capacity to exercise its constitutional role. As we speak, MPs, parliamentary staff, members of civil society and women leaders are in grave danger. We urge you all to call on those in power and authority in Afghanistan to protect the lives and physical integrity of parliamentarians and their staff, facilitating assistance to those who are subject to or fear reprisals – including by helping their urgent evacuation from the country and supporting the provision of humanitarian assistance to those in need.

On Sunday, yet another military coup took place, this time in Guinea. We strongly condemn the dissolution of the National Assembly and the use of force to change the constitutional order.

The IPU is particularly concerned with the situation of parliamentarians in Guinea. We call for their human rights to be respected as well as the integrity of the institution of parliament. We call for the swift return to constitutional rule and urge all sides to find peaceful and sustainable solutions through the rule of law, dialogue and mediation. The IPU stands by to help Guinea to develop a strong, effective and representative parliament that delivers for all the people.

Beyond the attacks of parliament, we are witnessing a growing and very worrying threat of terrorism and violent extremism, as evidenced by the recent terrorist attacks in various countries and regions, be they the Sahel, the Middle East, or countries such as Mozambique.

In this context, our meetings in Vienna this week have taken on crucial importance. The current state of the world calls for leadership, solidarity and transformative action. This is our opportunity to come together to examine and re-energize multilateralism in order to safeguard peace, rebuild a weakened global socio-economic climate, protect democratic principles and strengthen respect for universal human rights.

Dear colleagues,

18 months into the pandemic, although the economic recovery is picking up, it is uncertain and uneven. The gap between developed and developing economies has been increasing. The crisis has revealed and worsened already high levels of inequalities within and between countries. One of the growing inequalities is the global gender gap. The impacts of crises are never gender neutral, and the COVID-19 crisis is no exception. The effects of lockdowns and economic downturns are more gravely felt by women and girls. Decades of gains in gender equality risk being reversed. In addition, around 100 million people are at risk of falling back into extreme poverty by the end of the year.

A clear strategy is needed to energize the economic recovery, address some of the long-term effects of the pandemic and work towards a faster eradication of COVID-19, through fair and widespread access to vaccines and robust health systems.

Beyond the pandemic, we must address the climate emergency. Extreme weather events – such as increasingly virulent heatwaves, fires and storms on all continents – constitute dire warnings about the health of our planet. The recently released IPCC report on climate change is a code red for humanity. Greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel burning and deforestation are choking our planet and putting billions of people at immediate risk from irreversible global heating. The time to act is now, and we need to be part of the solution.

The pandemic has tested the resilience of parliaments, but they must remain at the centre of efforts to nurture democratic, inclusive, prosperous and resilient societies that are able to withstand the shocks of our changing world.

As part of these efforts, we need to step up action towards the empowerment of women. The plight of women and girls needs to be high on our agenda. Decades of progress in women's rights and empowerment, women's central role in democracy but also girls' education risk being unravelled without our strong leadership to protect women and girls from all forms of discrimination and violence. Later today, we will be discussing the need for a new global social compact for gender equality. We are counting on you to pursue robust action in your parliaments to make such a compact a reality.

Equally, we are convinced of the need to enhance youth participation in politics, hence rejuvenating democracy and its institutions. We must deliver on young people's expectations to inherit a better world. Earlier this year, the IPU launched its I Say Yes to Youth in Parliament campaign. As leaders in our parliaments and political parties, we are encouraged to join the IPU in promoting this campaign and bringing about positive change.

Last but not least, I would like to welcome the incoming President of the UN General Assembly, Mr. Abdulla Shahid of the Maldives, himself a former Speaker of Parliament, and the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Vienna, Ms. Ghada Fathi Waly. The first Speakers' Conference took place 20 years ago on the occasion of the UN Millennium Summit, during which Heads of State and Government acknowledged the need for systematic cooperation between the UN system and national parliaments, through the IPU as their world organization.

We count on you, President Shahid and Madam Director-General Waly, to continue to take that relationship forward, with a view to bringing the voice of parliamentarians to global processes and helping to transform international commitments into national realities. Multilateralism and global governance need to be reformed and strengthened, so as to effectively deliver on the needs and expectations of people everywhere. We stand ready to join you in this process.

Dear Colleagues,

A better, more peaceful and prosperous world calls for parliamentary solidarity and effective cooperation at all levels – national, regional and international.

As Speakers of Parliament, you have a key role in your countries in bringing to life a vision for eradicating the current pandemic, addressing the major challenges of our time and anchoring us on the path towards a better future. Our Conference this week must embody our determination to embrace positive and transformative change.

I encourage the parliamentary leaders in this hall to answer the call of a troubled world, through ideas, visions, pledges to action and, ultimately, the adoption of our common high-level Declaration.

Thank you.